

Gender and the language of religion

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Gender and the Language of Religion

JULE, A (ed), 2005

Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Xi + 281 pp, hardback £50.00 (Amazon) £55.00 (Blackwells)

Gender and religion are two major influences on our sense of identity and behaviour. Does traditionally patriarchal language diminish women in all societies, those in which gender equality has not been achieved - or does it have no effect? In her introduction to this wide ranging collection of 14 papers investigating the impact of gender on the language used in many different religions and cultures, Jule suggests that this volume "searches for a range of language experiences within religious communities" so that "perceptions and assumptions can be deeply explored". The contributors, experts in their fields, provide interesting and instructive perspectives on how gender influences language patterns and language use, with a particular focus on a variety of religious thought and religious communities.

Does the male hegemony associated with many religions really inhibit women's potential growth in societies dominated by those religions? Francis Britto in *The Gender of God* (page 26) suggests that for some feminists "The whole of recorded history ... is seen ... as a history of female oppression and male conspiracy to keep women oppressed" as he discusses how the usage of male metaphors for God contribute to this conspiracy. He presents an interesting and accessible discourse on the possible alienation of intellectual women from the Christian Church

through arguments which raise questions almost as challenging as an explanation of the concept of a triune God. Kalyani Shabadi makes it clear in the final chapter of the collection that gender differences in Oriya, one of the languages spoken in India, reflect both social and cultural factors, such as patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence, which contribute to discrimination within the language itself.

Some chapters are more technical, and likely to hold particular appeal for specialists in the field, like the informative *Asymmetries of Male/Female Representation in Arabic* (Chapter 3) with its detailed statistical analysis of gender in the language of names and kinship terms. Many, however, are expressed clearly enough for the non specialist reader to develop a new understanding of how a particular religious culture influences the opportunities that men and women have in life. *Women's letters to the Editor* (Chapter 6), for example, opens a window through which to enter the world of culture specific values held by and about women in the Saudi Arabia of the late 20th century.

The pervasive impact of technology on religion ranges from Johann Gutenberg's 14th century printing press to 21st century Internet availability of information and discussion forums. Chapter 7 probes gender roles in an online Episcopal cyber parish to find out whether women are marginalised, and analyses the communicative and linguistic strategies which are employed to claim authority within that community. This makes for fascinating reading and, once it becomes more widely known that women's empowerment in a cyber parish is a realistic alternative to the continuing arguments over women's roles in traditional parishes, a conclusion which could conceivably have a major influence on female participation in formal worship.

Chapter 11 also provides an interesting juxtaposition to *Women's letters to the Editor* by looking at how British Islamic women use an online community to express their opinions and assert their positions on a wide variety of different topics related to their faith.

In the most right wing American Jewish Orthodox communities boys have dominant roles in the process of learning about their faith, spending a large proportion of their time learning the Talmud. Girls are not allowed to study this, but results of research (Chapter 13) revealed a wider gap between boys and girls in the mastery of the Hebrew language. That it was in favour of the girls, rather than the boys may come as a surprise.

This anthology includes a balance of commentaries and research on traditional religious communities as well as looking at more outré society like *The Children of God*, with a sensitive treatment of how religious beliefs about gender have profoundly affected the way individuals both discuss and live their lives in a ministry referred to, somewhat anomalously, as Liberty. In the Church of England in the past year 283 women and 295 men were recommended for training as clergy, a narrowing of the margin which dismays some and delights others: also in the past year a tabloid trend has developed for Muslims to be synonymous with terrorists rather than reflective practitioners. The combination of styles and topics in this book therefore make for an interesting and highly topical resource.

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